



FREEDOM NOW

***Azerbaijan: Pardons Issued to 12 Prisoners of Conscience; Many More Remain Imprisoned***

Washington, D.C.: Freedom Now takes note of [pardons issued to 12 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan today](#). Among them were writer Saday Shakarli, Popular Front Party member Elnur Farajov, religious activist Valeh Abdullayev, seven members of the Muslim Unity Movement arrested during a security raid in the village of Nardaran in November 2015, and two individuals involved in the 2012 hijab protests. President Ilham Aliyev issued pardons ahead of the 100th anniversary of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.

“We welcome the long overdue release of these twelve individuals; a relief for their families and friends,” said Freedom Now’s Washington Director Melina Milazzo. “However, we must express tremendous disappointment that President Aliyev did not extend pardons to the scores of other prisoners of conscience in the country, including opposition politician Ilgar Mammadov, journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, and youth activists Giyas Ibrahimov and Bayram Mammadov. As Azerbaijan celebrates the centennial of its progressive, democratic legacy, we cannot help but notice that President Aliyev’s regime continues to reject democratic principles and the rule of law.”

Local activists have documented [more than 140 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan](#), including human rights defenders, political opposition leaders, civil society leaders, religious activists, and journalists. The crackdown on civil society began in 2011, reaching a crisis point in 2014 and 2015 when the government initiated legal proceedings against more than two dozen civil society organizations, forcing many of them to close. There was reason for optimism in late 2015 and 2016 when the government released more than a dozen prominent prisoners of conscience, including journalist Khadija Ismayilova and lawyer Intigam Aliyev. However, this optimism was short lived as a constitutional referendum passed in September 2016 which gave President Aliyev considerably more power. In early 2017, the government moved to block five independent news websites, including U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. In May 2017, journalist Afgan Mukhtarli was abducted from Tbilisi, Georgia and forcibly removed to Azerbaijan where he has sentenced to six years in prison. In December 2017, the Council of Europe began infringement proceedings against Azerbaijan for refusing to comply with a judgment by the European Court of Human Rights regarding Ilgar Mammadov, who has been imprisoned since 2013. In April 2018, President Aliyev won a fourth term in office in an election widely criticized by international observers.